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ABSTRACT

The role of academic reference librarians is taking new shape with the continuous development of library technologies. In addition to their traditional bibliographical, academic, and personal competencies, librarians also have to possess technological expertise in order to gain access to automated library processes both for themselves, and for providing individual and group online and CD-ROM instruction. Additionally, because of their daily contact with patrons, librarians can aid in determining user and community needs, thereby helping to establish budget priorities for building library resources and managing staffing. Administrative decisions about automation are also increasingly being made by reference librarians. Continuing education is recommended for all reference librarians to maintain current knowledge of library information and resource issues. It is also suggested that librarians should play a proactive role in requesting financial support for continuing education, and that they should strive to keep communication lines open with administrators so that they can be informed and can inform the administrators of new systems, technologies, and programs. (6 references) (SD)

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF REFERENCE LIBRARIAN IN MODERN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

With the development of new library technologies, online databases and CD-ROM databases are widely available in libraries. Reference service in most libraries require more than traditional directional and informational assistance. One typical reference inquiry may take triple the time to provide a satisfactory answer because of various resource formats available. Reference desks can no longer operate successfully and effectively without additional professional and paraprofessional staff. Students, faculty, and other library researchers are attracted to CD-ROM databases. Most libraries locate their workstations near the reference desk. Reference librarians have to provide individualized instruction on these systems. Individualized instruction at different levels is required. Reference librarians in modern academic libraries not only have to meet these new challenges, they also have to keep pace with traditional reference duties, such as bibliographic instruction, regular online databases searching, collection development, and in-depth reference research by using various printed sources. This paper is aimed at sharing some ideas that might help the academic librarians meet new challenges in this constantly changing library world.

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In the past decade much new technology has been introduced to the library world promising to solve many information access problems. This new trend creates many scenarios for providing reference service in academic libraries. Reference collections not only contain printed sources, they also include various new formats, such as online databases and CD-ROM products. Reference services in most academic libraries require more than traditional directional and informational assistance. Due to technological innovations, reference librarians' roles are becoming more sophisticated and their tasks more time consuming. This trend reflects our conference theme of "Libraries on the Wings of Change."

Carlyle once said, "To-day is not yesterday: we ourselves change; how can our works and thoughts, if they are always to be the fittest, continue always the same? Change, indeed, is painful; yet never needful; and if memory have its force and worth, so also has hope." New technologies indeed bring new hope to the library world. In the past century, several developments have influenced reference service in academic libraries. Because of changing college and university curricula and new teaching methods of the professors, students are encouraged to use the library for research. The library has become more than a study hall with a reserve book collection. Because of diminished reliance on departmental libraries in recent decades, the library

resources can no longer be restricted to the faculty and upperclass students in the departments they serve. Students at every level must have equal access to a core collection of the best books in their respective disciplines.[1] Library collections in academic libraries are becoming more centralized. Reference librarians have access to a wide spectrum of resources in providing their effective service. New trends create new roles for reference librarians. They have to use their knowledge and resources to stimulate students' creative thinking in library research.

The paradoxical experience of libraries with various programs has caused constant or even increasing demand for new services--online services, and CD-ROMs. To meet this demand, reference librarians must act as teachers, consultants, and problem solvers for library users, as well as agents to assist with document delivery. These demands will stretch the librarians' range and the overall level of professionalism.

The methods and tools of bibliographical access to information in each academic library have a significant impact on that library's reference services. The availability of well-designed, up-to-date reference books and diversified abstracting and indexing services provides access to a wealth of resources. The role of the reference librarian in keeping abreast of new developments in bibliographic control and in bringing promising innovations to the academic library has as much importance as the role of

teaching faculty in keeping informed about the latest research in their respective disciplines.[2]

In addition to the traditional influences imposed on reference services, the reference librarian in the modern academic library probably will have to add technological expertise to their bibliographical, academic, and personal competencies. Many college and university libraries in Illinois have automated their card catalogs, circulation systems, interlibrary loan systems, and resource sharing networks. This signals a new era for reference service. A union catalog like Illinet Online provides subject access using primarily Library of Congress name and subject authority files and keyword searching capability. The collections of over 800 public, system, academic, and special libraries throughout Illinois are searchable. Opportunities for timely, inexpensive resource sharing are created. Reference librarians in these libraries require not only professional skills in interpreting conventional printed sources, but also require technological expertise in addition to their professional compentencies. With the new developments in Illinois, library researchers in thirty plus academic libraries currently enjoy full reciprocal privileges with each other. Reference librarians are excited about the wealth of resources at their finger tips which aid their daily performance through various networks. Reference desks can hardly be operated successfully and effectively without additional professional and paraprofessional staff. A

careful study of staffing levels is important for all information providers.

Dale S. Montanelli in his article, "What reference librarians should know about library finance?" states, "Since reference librarians provide a primary link with the patrons, and are therefore on the forefront of detecting both user needs of and community for the library, reference librarians serve a central function in the development of programs and services which in turn must be funded through the budget request process."[3] The administration of the library should be concerned with library organization and communication. The better the administration functions, the less obvious it appears--at least to the user. Therefore, the reference librarian plays an important role in this process. Because of the changing roles of the reference librarians, their involvement with the library budget in building library resources and managing staffing has become a necessity in the modern library. Once a budget request has been funded, it becomes the librarian's responsibility to insure that the funds are used as efficiently as possible to accomplish the program for which they were received.[4] The reference librarian must be aware of, and often participate in, administrative decisions ranging from budget to automation. For instance, due to budgetary constraints, Northern Illinois University Libraries, uses technical service librarians to support the reference desk services during peak hours. This change brings many merits to reference services

and library organization, although it causes inconvenience to technical services departments. In the preface to Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, Richard Hooker stated, "Change is not made without inconvenience; even from worse to better." This development provides an opportunity for staff to exchange ideas and to keep them in harmony and unity.

Currently academic libraries are using technologies, such as, mainframe computers, microcomputers, laser printers, modems, and telecommunication networks. These libraries use these technologies to access online services and CD-ROM databases. Students, faculty, and other library researchers are attracted to these new formats. Many libraries place their workstations for these products near the reference desk. Reference librarians in academic libraries have to offer individualized instruction on these systems according to the library patrons' needs. Some academic libraries place special labels on the printed indexes to inform users that the same information can be retrieved from the online and CD-ROM databases. Once library users discover this new information, they come to the reference desk for instruction. For first time CD-ROM users, this involves more than just how to use the machine and how to retrieve information from them. It also involves instruction in the use of databases, refining the search strategies, downloading information retrieved, etc. Therefore individualized instruction at different levels is unavoidable. Though it is a rewarding and challenging experience for reference librarians, time must be

allowed to complete these necessary tasks. In addition to conventional library bibliographic instruction, reference librarians have to take user education into serious consideration. Programs may be integrated with any established library bibliographic instruction program and they may be extended to accommodate the upperclass students and faculty. With both informal and formal teaching activities in the library, most library users will perceive the librarian to be a better teacher. Online searching and CD-ROM resources are something about which they know little and are anxious to learn.[5]

Due to these technological changes, the teaching role of the reference librarian has been increasing constantly and the reference librarian has to continue learning about the changes of each individual system and device. Last December, our library installed three Infotrac workstations running General Periodicals Index--Academic and five SilverPlatter Products including ERIC, MEDLINE, SocioFile, PsycLIT, and GPO. No formal instruction was presented to the reference librarians. Those dedicated librarians had to spend their own time on learning them through database manuals. They then shared their newly acquired skills with their colleagues. This means that reference librarians have to be away from reference desk duties for staff training and research. Technology alone has introduced numerous terms--coming to us from the media, recent literature, workshops, seminars, conferences and teaching faculty who have recently received

degrees in higher education. Our vocabularies and our knowledge must be increased in all disciplines to avoid being caught off guard by library users. In order to interpret library resources to students and faculty, it is our responsibility to keep abreast of these new developments in library technologies and resources.[6]

Continuing education is necessary for every reference librarian. Because of new technology and new concepts in librarianship, it is imperative that reference librarians continue their education. Workshops and seminars are offered in specific areas of interest. These continuing educational programs in librarianship are beneficial in helping to keep librarians up-to-date on library information and resources. The broader ones base of knowledge, the more capable and qualified he or she will be as a reference librarian. As reference librarians, we have an on-going responsibility, both personally and professionally, to strive to become more competent and skilled in the performance of our jobs.[7] All of this, and particularly the mystery and mystique of the computer, has added to the prestige of the reference librarian.

In order to fulfill these objectives, reference librarians should play an advocate role in requesting financial support. Without administrative support of release time and financing, the reference librarians will not be able to perform their work efficiently and productively. Also, administrators should keep communication lines open with

reference librarians at all times. Reference librarians should be informed of any newly acquired devices or changes within the organization. For instance, library adminstrators should offer staff development programs for reference librarians to learn new systems before the services are provided to the public. Not doing so presents obstacles for reference librarians. A well planned staff development program should be offered on a regular basis in order to increase awareness of new technologies. No matter how new technology is to be developed and used, the role of libraries remains one of putting library patrons in contact with the information resources they need as quickly and as easily as possible. Being a reference librarian is a continous learning process, as well as a helping service. I can think of no other profession that lends itself to this type of satisfaction, because the learning comes from many disciplines.[8]

To summarize, for the future, reference services in academic libraries will continue to be affected by traditional influences, but the greater influence will be exercised by the introduction of new technologies. Selecting new technologies and staying abreast of new technological developments may become as important as selecting new reference books and maintaining current bibliographical awareness. Using electronic reference resources efficiently and effectively may become as routine an activity as using printed resources. Reference librarians in academic

libraries have adapted to an atmosphere of responsiveness to change.[9]

Reference librarians in modern academic libraries not only have to meet all these new challenges, they also have to keep pace with traditional reference duties, such as the selection and acquisition of reference materials to help them answer questions, bibliographic instruction, and in-depth reference research by using various printed sources. In spite of the limited budget for the library, the most important role for reference librarians is one that demonstrates a positive attitude toward the profession, the organization served, the library, and the library users.[10]

FOOTNOTES:

1. Amherst College. Annual Report of the Librarian, 1920, p.6

2. Miller, Richard E. "The Tradition of Reference Service in the Liberal Arts college Library," R.Q. vol.25, no.4, Summer 1986, p.456

3. Montanelli, Dale S. "What Reference Librarians Should Know About Library Finances," Reference Librarian, no.19, 1987, p.16

4. Ibid., p.23

5. Huang, Samuel T. "CD-ROM Databases:Unique Resources for Libraries," Lazerdisk Professional,vol.2,no.2, March 1989, p.65

6. Flinner, Beatrice E. "A Scenario of the Reference Librarian in a Small University Library," Reference Librarian, no.19, 1987, p.346

7. Ibid., p.342

8. Ibid., p.357

9. Miller, op. cit., p.466

10. Katz, William A. Introduction to Reference Work, Vol.1, Basic Information Sources. Fifth edition., New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1987, p.8